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ABSTRACT

The Council on Occupational Education, Inc. (COE) is a not-for-profit corporation that was established in 1994 to serve as a national accreditor for all providers of postsecondary work force training and education who can meet its standards. The COE has developed a new system of quality assurance for occupational education that emphasizes the following components: occupational skill standards as the basis for program design; skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals; and job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs. COE's mission is to ensure quality and integrity in career and work force development. COE has proposed working closely with all levels of government. The Council meets regularly with representatives of other national vocationally related accreditors and has a major (although not exclusive) commitment to publicly funded occupational education programs. In addition to accrediting career and work force development providers, COE also provides the following accreditation-related support services: program quality review; professional development for management and instructional personnel; and distribution of news and information of importance to its institutional members. (Appended are the mission statement, 10 guiding principles, and list of services offered by the COE.) (MN)

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IMPLEMENTATION OF OUTCOMES-BASED ACCREDITATION TO ASSURE QUALITY IN TECHNICAL EDUCATION

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Background

Institutional accreditation began in the United States during the 1890s with the initial purpose of promoting standardization among schools of common types, e. g., high schools (COPA, 1990; Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Since the 1950s, accreditation has assumed a major role in assuring educational quality as a requirement for postsecondary institutions to participate in federal student financial aid programs. The purpose of this presentation is to describe a new accrediting system for occupational education that focuses on the outcomes of workforce preparation programs.

Occupational education accreditation as practiced historically has utilized a set of standards pertaining to all aspects of the institution that are applied by institutional personnel to conduct a self-study of the institution and an independent team of technical educators-evaluators to conduct an on-site assessment based on the same standards. While the process remains the same, the new system of occupational education quality assurance (COE, 1995a; COE, 1995b) places major emphases on three components: (1) occupational skill standards as the basis for program design, (2) skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals, and (3) job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs.

This presentation draws on a comprehensive perspective of the new accrediting system to illustrate the essential dimensions of quality assurance for technical education and its importance to students, employers of graduates, funding sources, and the public.

What is COE?

The Council on Occupational Education, Inc. (COE) was established as a not-for-profit corporation under the laws of Georgia in June, 1994 to serve as a national accreditor for all providers of postsecondary workforce training and education who can meet its standards, regardless of the type of provider, e.g., institution, corporation, local/state/federal government, community-based organization, and other potential providers. COE is committed to a skill standards, skill certification, and job placement outcomes-based approach which requires a program-specific evaluation of members. This breadth of future members in combination with the standards/outcomes-based policies and practices makes COE a unique and innovative contributor to American postsecondary education. There simply is no similar entity.

COE is emerging from the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) which was formed in 1971. Thus, it has extensive experience in accrediting programs in a wide range of settings, including non-degree and associate-degree institutions from public, private not-for-profit, and proprietary sectors; corporate and industry schools; military specialized training centers; and Job Corps Centers. Currently COEI has approximately 360 accredited institutional members and 10 candidates for accreditation.

An agreement, approved by COEI/COE and SACS in December, 1994, enabled COE to assume and maintain all COEI functions and records when separation from SACS occurred on June 30, 1995. Further, on December 28, 1994, Assistant Secretary David A. Longanecker, U.S. Department of Education, wrote Dr. Harry L. Bowman, Executive Director of both the former COEI and the new COE, confirming that the Secretary of Education "will consider COE to be the successor to COEI." The signing of this agreement with SACS and the clarification of the federal status were the final steps needed in order for COE to begin functioning as an independent, national accreditor of workforce programs in the Summer of 1995, when it will relocate and complete its separation from SACS.

Simultaneously, COEI/COE has been undergoing its regularly scheduled reviews by the U.S. Department of Education and by the Commission on Recognition of

Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) for "re-recognition" as an accreditor. The review by CORPA has been completed, and COE has been recognized as a national agency to accredit non-degree and degree-granting occupational/technical education institutions. The review by the Secretary of Education is still underway and should be completed in a couple of months.

What is COE's mission?

COE has worked with the current COEI members, its staff and consultants to develop the Draft Mission Statement (included as the Appendix to this paper), which summarizes the mission as "... assuring quality and integrity in career and workforce development." This mission statement lists eight values, ten guiding principles, and four proposed services (including accreditation with an outcomes-based program utilizing skill standards, skill certification, and job placement). The mission statement and the COE development plan (Plan) are based upon a longer document produced in August, 1994, Assuring Quality and Integrity: A New Vision of Occupational Education in America .

In order to keep the Plan on track and within a proper context of related events, a chronology is being maintained. It lists twenty-seven steps already accomplished along with twelve to be completed during 1995. In addition, a business plan has been developed for the COEI/COE transition. It details actual and projected revenues and expenditures for fiscal years ending June 30, 1993 through 1998.

Is the COE mission similar to that of other accreditors?

The COE vision was developed under the leadership of COEI/COE Executive Director Harry Bowman over a period of two years but draws upon his experience as a COEI evaluator and board member since 1977. While this was concurrent with several related state and national initiatives, it is distinctive in its origin and intentions. Factors contributing to the creation of COE range from those internal to SACS (jurisdiction and finance), through those related to Congressional actions and proposals (beginning with Higher Education Amendments Act of 1992), through rising demands from governors and business leaders for more attention to the quality of occupational education, and to

discussions of other regional and national accreditors. (A later section of this paper lists these and other circumstances related to the formation of COE by placing the Plan within a national context.)

Because of the importance of the issues involved, Bowman participated in the early discussions and meetings of the National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPBHEIA). However, when that board decided to limit its plans and proposed policies to degree-granting institutions only, its relevance to the total postsecondary occupational spectrum was lost. As described in the NPBHEIA October, 1994 report, Independence, Accreditation, and the Public Interest, its work is, in fact, clearly limited to degree-granting institutions, and it is decidedly different from the COE Plan for at least two other reasons:

First, because of the importance and close connection between occupational education and federal, state, and local governments, COE proposes to work closely with those governments, even to place representatives of governmental agencies within its policy-making and governing structure. Secondly, since no other regional accrediting association had a counterpart to COEI of SACS (New England's structure not being even a close parallel), COEI did not have a set of similar accreditors with which to collaborate on new accreditation matters.

COE meets regularly with representatives of other national vocationally-related accreditors, e.g., Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS), Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES), and Accrediting Commission for Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT). However, none of these agencies has the breadth of membership as does COE.

In particular, COE has a major, though not exclusive, commitment to publicly funded occupational programs. In regions other than the South (and to some extent New England), non-degree public postsecondary programs are not accredited consistently. Several states have sought and obtained from the U.S. Secretary of Education special status as "state approving agencies" in their own names in order for their citizens to maintain eligibility for Title IV student aid funds. COEI/COE hosted a meeting of four of these states in St. Louis on October 19, 1994, and was encouraged by all attendees to

proceed with the Plan and to keep all "state approving agency" states informed. (On February 8, 1995, COEI/COE met with officials of the Missouri "state approval agency" and received strong additional encouragement for the Plan.)

Thus, the COE mission and related Plan are unique, timely, and needed. No other effort is in competition, and since the Plan proposes to expand significantly the previous COEI sources of policy input, new services may be provided for members as new geographic territories are added.

What is the COE Plan?

The several materials prepared by COEI/COE officials (Draft COE Mission Statement, Assuring Quality and Integrity: A New Vision of Occupational Education in America,, and 1993-98 COEI/COE Business Plan) form the basis of the COE Plan, which may be summarized as follows:

A. Define in operational terms the mission, values, guiding principles, services, governance and organizational structure, and stakeholders for the new COE.

B. Develop new and appropriate identity, image, and marketing approaches and materials (Concurrent with "A").

C. Review existing accreditation standards, practices, and procedures; compare with those of other accrediting agencies regarded as most effective in quality assurance; solicit ideas from businesses, government officials, representatives of labor, students, providers of workforce education and training, and others; and **develop new standards, practices, and procedures that are based upon skill standards, skill certification, and job placement with a system that is valid and reliable.** (See Item "F.")

D. Review and apply to COE as appropriate the three major recent Congressional actions related to standards-based ("systemic") reform of American postsecondary education: Higher Education Amendments Act of 1992, Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, and School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994. (Particular focus is to be applied to the forthcoming discussions and recommendations of the National Skill Standards Board created by the Goals 2000 Act. This review will also include identification of potentially applicable lessons learned from findings and recommendations of those major studies that created the environment that led to Congress' passage of the three Acts listed above, e.g., the Special Senate Subcommittee on Investigations' work on fraud and abuse of federal student aid, *The Forgotten Half* report of the William T. Grant Foundation, the *High Skills or Low Wages* report of the National

Commission on Education and the Economy, and the SCANS report of the Bush Administration.)

E. Review state-of-the-art information and communications systems in education, government, and business; adapt ideas to accreditation purposes; and implement new program of communications services.

F. Develop a method to assure that the accrediting process is a valid and reliable one.

G. Successfully complete current process of "re-recognition" by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA).

H. Begin functions as independent, national accreditor in summer, 1995.

When these specific steps, which are the immediate elements in the plan for the development of COE, are completed, consideration will be given to such other important matters as finding a basis other than dues for supporting the agency's operating budget and determining whether to extend the agency's scope to occupational degree levels beyond the associate degree. The issue of financing accreditation and related support functions by some means which would provide for budget stability while dropping members who do not continue to meet standards and for budget growth without adding new members or increasing fees is one that remains unsolved, but COE will explore this matter. The potential for a growth market in bachelors- and higher-level applied technology degrees has been noted recently by several state licensure agencies, and the possibility of COE serving this sector will be studied after COE has begun its national service through the associate-degree level.

Why are these steps necessary?

The specific activities associated with the Plan are needed for several reasons:

1. COEI has existed since 1971 as a part of a larger and older organization, SACS, which serves institutions in an eleven- state region. COE will be an independent accrediting and service organization with a national mission. It must have the input of a number of participants who are "new" to the COEI/COE experience. [Plan Element A]

2. COE must communicate its existence and services to workforce education and training providers many of which have no knowledge of its COEI heritage. [Plan Element B]

3. COE is beginning its work at a time of significant national concern over the value, meaning, and relevance of accreditation in general, e.g., U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Investigations' 1991 findings, 1992 Congressional changes in Higher Education Amendments Act, demise of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), current studies of "National Policy Board on Accreditation of Higher Education" (limited to degree-granting), and "Contract With America." COE has an opportunity to "create" a process deemed by employers, government, educators, and students to be meaningful. Applying lessons learned from businesses and government, e.g., Deming-like quality assurance techniques, can greatly facilitate this process. [Plan Element C]

4. COE's emergence is concurrent with the federal implementation of the Higher Education Amendments Act of 1992 (with its new Program Integrity Triad responsibilities for accreditors, states, and the federal government), the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 (with its emphasis upon standards-based reforms, including those to be recommended by the new National Skill Standards Board), and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (which extends the standards-based reforms and stresses relating academic and vocational training more closely with each other and with the needs of the workplace). COE has both an obligation to work within this context and an opportunity to lead the accreditation world with new standards-based, outcomes-measured policies, practices, and procedures that will be applicable for all providers of postsecondary occupational education and training in the country through the associate degree level. [Plan Element D]

5. Establishing a state-of-the-art accreditation system should include the ability for more timely status reports regarding the quality of the education and training offered by accredited members. An "on-line" computer-based information and communications system would prove of great value to businesses and government as well as to the accrediting agency itself. [Plan Element E]

6. Some techniques have been utilized by accrediting agencies, particularly certain discipline-specific ones, to determine that their accrediting processes are valid and reliable. However, there is no clear model for making such determinations. The COE Plan anticipates the incorporation of a comprehensive program within its initial and ongoing functions to assure (a) that its new standards, practices, and procedures are based upon skill standards, skill certification, and job placement, and (b) that the resulting accreditation system is valid and reliable. [Plan Elements C and F]

7. Recognition by the U.S. Secretary of Education is, of course, essential to institutions that wish to have their students eligible for federal student aid. Recognition by CORPA serves a quality assurance role for the accrediting agency through the peer review process used by CORPA. [Plan Element G]

8. The nation needs the proposed services of COE, and COE should provide them as soon as possible. [Plan Element H]

What is the national context of the Plan?

COE's development and initial activities are taking place within a dynamic national context that can be briefly outlined in three dimensions:

A. Current federal context ...

(1) Higher Education Amendments Act of 1992

(2) Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994

(3) School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994

(4) Reauthorization of Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act
(Including Proposals of Chairmen Goodling and Kassebaum to Reform Federally Funded Vocational/Technical Assistance)

(5) Contract with America

(6) U.S. Department of Education's Proposed "Phase II" Reform of Federal Student Aid

(7) President's Proposed "Middle Income Assistance Act"

(8) Reactions to these federal initiatives by National Governor's Association (NGA), National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), and institutionally-based organizations (e.g., the American Council on Education, etc.)

B. Context of other accrediting agencies ...

(1) Absence of other regional occupational accreditors

(2) Demise of Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

(3) Current studies and tentative plans of National Policy Board on Higher Education Institutional Accreditation

(4) Current studies and plans of other nationally-recognized accrediting agencies

C. Context of business interests regarding quality assurance ...

(1) Interest in Total Quality Management and teamwork

(2) Occupational/skill standards

(3) Skill certification system

(4) Productivity improvements

(5) Quality of workforce

How does the Plan propose to work within this national context?

COE will involve persons who are active participants within the major activities defining this context. Potential COE "partners" for these activities are numerous and include:

a. Current member schools

b. Similar potential members from other regions

c. States (Governors, SHEEOs, SPREs, Vocational officials & boards, etc.)

d. Corporations and businesses

e. Associations of businesses (State and National Business Roundtables, National Alliance of Business, Local, State, and National Chambers of Commerce, etc.)

f. Associations of States (National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislators, Education Commission of the States, SHEEO, etc.)

g. U.S. Government (Departments of Education and Labor, Congress, other executive branch officials, etc.)

h. National associations of vocational/technical education (AVA, state directors of vocational/technical education, etc.)

I. Others (to be identified as this Plan is refined).

How will the work of COE "partners" be structured?

COE has not completed the details of the involvement of this long list of potential "partners," but several task groups are envisioned:

I. COE Mission Advisory Panel [Broadest point of view from CEOs, governors, cabinet level officials, etc.]

II. National Vocational/Technical Quality Assurance Panel [Exploration of potential nationally recognized quality assurance standards and related measures by experienced experts and advisors]

III. Validity and Reliability Panel [Provide oversight and advice regarding the validity and reliability exercises]

IV. COE Functional Advisory Panels & Consultants [Focused points of view regarding initial COE operating procedures, priorities, and tentative plans for further development from experienced experts, both in panels and as individual consultants and advisors]

V. COE Constituent & External Relations Advisory Activities [Development of recommendations for the most effective and constructive relations between COE and its constituents as well as its essential external "stakeholders"]

These task groups (or those that may finally be chosen) will be structured for success by defining the following for each: objectives, calendar, participants, method and term of appointments, duties of participants, type of support staff services, estimate of cost of activity, and source of financial support.

Who will be affected by the COE Plan?

In addition to COE and its members, the Plan will directly affect states, the federal government, businesses, and several categories of people ... ranging from the estimated 75 - 80% of Americans who do not earn a bachelor's or higher level degree; the unemployed who enroll in occupational training in order to become employed; the racial minorities who are disproportionately poor, undertrained, and unemployed; disadvantaged women who are striving for more equitable circumstances; to the workers who are displaced through technological changes.

How will the Plan help these entities and people?

Fulfillment of the Plan will result in a national "seal of quality" for postsecondary occupational programs that meet the COE standards, thereby providing students who complete these programs with credentials which will be preferred by employers. It should also assist students by facilitating the acceptance of credit. Such help may be in the form of academic articulation agreements among institutions (both non- and degree-granting) as well as through skill attainment records. The commitment of COE to work directly and cooperatively with appropriate state officials, who are very interested in promoting a reasonable "seamless" web of educational opportunities, is a major indication of the Plan's likely success. Finally, the Plan anticipates a set of defined skill standards with measurable skill certifications, and these will provide local, regional and interstate application, thereby benefiting students, employers, and governmental agencies concerned with planning for appropriate employment.

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APPENDIX

THE COUNCIL ON OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION, INC.

The Council on Occupational Education (COE) is a national accrediting agency with high standards that is responsive to the local needs of its members: public technical institutions, specialized military training schools, Job Corps Centers, private career schools, non-profit schools, Federal agency schools, community-based organizations, and corporate training units who meet the occupational education needs of students and employers.

COE is unique. No other agency accredits and serves this diversity of organizations. We learn from each other. Together we enhance the appreciation for career and workforce development.

COE's **Mission** is . . .

assuring quality and integrity in career and workforce development.

The Values of the Organization

COE stands for:

Skills:

Career and workforce development must provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for success in the workplace.

Occupational skills are applied academic skills.

Academics are best learned when applied to real life situations.

All competencies must be valued in career and workforce development.

Performance:

Quality is determined by our results.

Mastery must be the hallmark of career and workforce development.

Accountability:

Everyone in career and workforce development must be responsible to the customer, most especially the student customer.

Progress: A commitment to continuous improvement is essential for lifelong learning in a changing workplace.

Ten Guiding Principles of COE

Rules COE lives by are:

1. We produce proud, productive participants for the global economy by focusing our attention on the student.
2. We believe in and promote the dignity of work.
3. We promote standards and services that match people to careers.
4. We are partners with employers, career and workforce development providers, public agencies, and non-public organizations.
5. We encourage the recognition and portability of demonstrated competencies.
6. We foster education partnerships that maximize learning resources and outcomes.
7. We believe in equal opportunity and equal access for everyone to prepare for entry and re-entry into the workforce.
8. We believe in the potential of all individuals to make a good living and to enjoy a good life with their families.
9. We know that occupational education pays - much more than it costs!
10. We celebrate success - the successes of our students, our partners, and ourselves!

Services of COE

Primary Service Accreditation of career and workforce development providers

Related Services Toward the primary service, COE provides the following accreditation-related support services:

A. Program quality review

B. Professional development for management and instructional personnel

C. Distribution of news and information of importance to institutional members